

Office of the City Clerk

Memorandum



To: Honorable Mayor and City Council
Through: Jan Dolan, City Manager
From: Carolyn Jagger, City Clerk
Date: September 10, 2004
Re: All Mail Ballot Elections

Issue: Mail Ballot Elections

The Council Budget Subcommittee recommends that the full Council consider the policy question of holding all mail ballot elections in Scottsdale with the goal of making government more accessible, improving customer service, and increasing voter turnout.

Process

Elections by mail are being held more frequently as a way to increase voter participation and convenience. Every municipality may hold an election by mail on any consolidated election date established by State Statute (March, May, September or November).

Essentially, an election by mail is an "all early ballot election," except that voters do not have to request their ballots. Nor do they have the option of casting a vote at the polls; all voters must vote by mail. The process for conducting mail ballot elections is simple. At the time the election is called, the Council sets the date for mailing a ballot to every registered voter (between 15 to 33 days prior to the consolidated election date).

Municipalities may establish one or more ballot drop-off and/or replacement ballot sites at convenient locations throughout the jurisdiction. Voters have the option of returning voted ballots to the County via U.S. Mail or hand delivering ballots to the Maricopa County Elections Department, or a designated drop-off site, during regular business hours throughout the voting period. Voted ballots may also be dropped off between the hours of 6:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. on Election Day. Ballots must be received by Maricopa County Elections no later than 7:00 p.m. on Election Day.

Return ballot envelopes are coded with a special Postal Code so postal officials will know to handle the ballots with extreme care and promptness, and not to leave them unsecured. Any undeliverable ballots are returned to Maricopa County. Every effort is made by the County to locate the voter before a ballot is considered undeliverable or before steps are taken to remove the voter from the voter registration rolls.

If a voter knows that he or she will be out of the City during the election period, the voter may submit a written request to the Maricopa County Elections Department to have his or her ballot mailed to a different address. If a voter misplaces or spoils the ballot, or does not receive a ballot, the voter may go to the Maricopa County Elections Department, or a designated replacement ballot site, to vote a provisional ballot.

To prevent voters from voting more than once, the County maintains an accurate record of when a voter casts his or her ballot by scanning a bar code located on the voted ballot envelope. The signature on the front of each returned envelopes is also verified against the voter registration form to prevent voter fraud.

In compliance with State Statute, the County completes the tabulation process and releases the results at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. In an all mail ballot election, it is not unusual to have a large number of ballots returned on Election Day. These ballots must be processed and the signatures verified before the ballots can be counted. In a tight race, the outcome of an election may be too close to call until all of the ballots have been processed and the results have been tabulated, which can take several days.

Benchmarking

Flagstaff is the largest jurisdiction in Arizona to conduct a citywide election by mail. In 2000, the City of Flagstaff conducted a single-issue, special election by mail to determine whether or not fluoride should be added to the municipal water system. Flagstaff realized a 44% voter turnout--16% higher than the 28% average voter turnout for the previous ten years.

In 1999, the City of Peoria (population 108,364) conducted a single district (7,456 registered voters) recall election by mail. The recall was not successful. Voter turnout for the election was 23%, which was an increase of 5% over the average voter turnout for the district.

Several smaller municipalities have conducted elections by mail with varying results. Attachment 1 contains statistics regarding mail ballot elections held at other jurisdictions throughout Arizona.

Analysis

As with all election systems, there are advantages and disadvantages to conducting an election by mail.

Advantages include:

- **Higher voter turnout.**
- **Improved voter convenience.** Citizens do not need to request a ballot or go to the polls--every qualified registered voter automatically receives a ballot in the mail.
- **Opportunity to clean the voter registration rolls** (which can reduce overall election costs for all types of elections).
- **Ballots are less cluttered.** Ballots contain only the questions and/or names of candidates for the jurisdiction conducting the mail ballot election.
- **Process is more secure.** In a regular election, voters who cast their vote at the polls must sign a signature roster, but the signatures are not verified against the signatures on record. In a mail ballot election every voter's signature is verified.
- **Easier to manage.** It is becoming more and more difficult for the County to recruit, hire, and train qualified poll workers.
- **Excellent process for single ballot issues or issues that are of citywide concern.**

Disadvantages include:

- **Higher cost.**
- **Voters must use multiple ballots and different methods of casting their votes if a statewide or countywide election is being held at the same time.** State law does not grant counties the authority to conduct an election by mail; therefore, Scottsdale may not be able to contract with Maricopa County for mail ballot services. Even if Maricopa County were able to conduct a countywide or

statewide election and an all mail ballot election at the same time, Scottsdale voters would be faced with multiple ballots and two different methods for casting their votes.

- **Delayed results.** If a large number of ballots are returned on Election Day, the outcome of an election may be too close to call until all of the ballots have been processed, which can take several days.
- **Voter confusion.** There is a greater potential for voter confusion when multiple elections are held on the same day.
- **Undeliverable ballots.**
- **Some citizens like to go to the polls.**

Budget Considerations

The cost for each election varies depending upon whether or not the municipality is able to consolidate with another jurisdiction, the number of registered voters, the size of the ballot, and if a publicity pamphlet is required. For a single-column ballot, non-consolidated election, Scottsdale pays Maricopa County \$0.73 per registered voter, plus \$1.43 for each early ballot request. The cost for conducting a consolidated election also varies, but can be as low as \$0.31 per registered voter, with no additional cost for early ballots. For a mail ballot election, the cost is \$1.43 per registered voter for a one-column ballot. (As of May 2004, Scottsdale had 117,072 active registered voters and an average voter turnout of 28%.)

When considering an election by mail, the Council may also consider whether or not the City will pay the return postage for voted ballots. The return postage cost varies based on postal rates, the size of the ballot, and the number of voted ballots returned via US Mail. A conservative cost estimate is between \$20,000 and \$40,000.

Options

- a. **Direct staff to include the option of conducting a mail ballot election each time the Council considers calling an election.** This option provides the Council with considerable flexibility, as the question of whether or not to hold an election by mail can be determined based on the nature and circumstances of each election. For example, the opportunity to consolidate with another jurisdiction, the need to call an election at the last minute, or a stand-alone franchise election in which the customer must bear the full cost of the election are three reasons the Council may not wish to hold an election by mail.
- b. **Adopt an ordinance declaring that all city elections will be by mail unless it conflicts with a countywide or statewide election.** This option provides direction regarding mail ballot elections, while still allowing the City to consolidate with other jurisdictions when needed.
- c. **Adopt an ordinance declaring that all city elections will be by mail.** This option offers clear direction to staff regarding how elections are to be conducted and provides consistency to the voter. However, Scottsdale may not be able to contract with Maricopa County for election services if a statewide or countywide election is being held at the same time as the mail ballot election.
- d. **No change.**

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or would like additional information.

c: Joe Bertoldo, City Attorney

Mail Ballot Elections September 2004

Municipality	Consolidates With County?	Average Voter Turnout		Return Postage Paid?	Comments
		Mail Ballot	Traditional Election		
Camp Verde (Pop. 9,451)	Yes	49%	36%	Yes	First election by mail was in 2001. Voters were confused when the municipality did not consolidate with the County; so, the jurisdiction has begun consolidating whenever necessary. Council passed an ordinance declaring that all elections will be by mail unless it conflicts with a County election.
Carefree (Pop. 2,927)	Yes	50%	20%	No	Began holding mail ballot elections in 1997, and now conducts all elections by mail that cannot be consolidated with Maricopa County. Carefree made this distinction because of the cost savings associated with consolidated elections.
Chino Valley (Pop. 8,167)	Yes	39%	25%	Yes	Held first mail ballot election in 2001.
Clarkdale (Pop. 3,422)	Yes	56%	34.5%	Yes	Began conducting elections by mail in 2000. In coordination with the County Board of Supervisors, Council makes the decision annually on whether or not to conduct elections by mail.
Flagstaff (Pop. 52,894)	Not Applicable	44% *	28%	Yes	In 2001, conducted a single-issue, all mail ballot special election. Although very pleased with the process, has not held another election by mail, primarily due to the significantly higher cost.
Litchfield Park (Pop. 3,810)	Yes	62%	35%	No	Held first election by mail in 2000. Council makes the decision on whether or not to conduct an election by mail at the time the election is called.
Oro Valley (Pop. 31,934)	Yes	40%	32.5%	Yes	First election by mail was in 2002. Council makes the decision on whether or not to conduct an election by mail at the time the election is called.
Paradise Valley (Pop. 13,664)	Yes	32.5%	16%	No	Began conducting all elections by mail in 2002. Council makes the decision on whether or not to conduct an election by mail at the time the election is called, but still tries to have a separate ballot whenever possible.
Payson (Pop. 13,620)	No	56%	38%	Yes	Held first all mail ballot election in 2003. Council makes the decision on whether or not to conduct an election by mail at the time the election is called.
Peoria (Pop. 108,364)	Not Applicable	23% *	18%	No	In 1999, the City of Peoria conducted a single district recall election by mail (7,456 registered voters). The recall was unsuccessful.
Prescott Valley (Pop. 23,535)	Yes	40%	9%	Yes	Held first election by mail in 1999. All regular elections are conducted by mail. For special elections, jurisdiction tries to consolidate with the County. If a regular election conflicts with a County election, the jurisdiction would probably consolidate with the County.
Sahuarita (Pop. 3,242)	Undecided	44%	30%	Yes	Held first election by mail in 2003 (primary and general). All future elections will be by mail unless there is a compelling reason to consolidate with the County.
Sedona (Pop. 10,192)	No	56.5%	26.5%	Yes	Held first election by mail in 2002.
Show Low (Pop. 7,695)	Not Applicable	42.5%	15%	Yes	2002 Primary and General were mail ballot elections. The jurisdiction was very happy with the process and the results. However, the new Council was not interested in holding mail ballot elections.

* Single election.